

SOLAR POWERED ELECTROLYSIS OF BRACKISH WATER**CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

The present invention is a continuation-in-part of, and is entitled to the benefit of the
5 earlier filing date and priority of, co-pending U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 10/427,272,
entitled "METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR ELECTROREFINING IMPURE HYDROGEN"
filed May 1, 2003, which is assigned to the same assignee as the current application, and co-
pending U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 10/367,060, entitled "HYDROGEN
INFRASTRUCTURE, A COMBINED BULK HYDROGEN STORAGE/SINGLE STAGE
10 METAL HYDRIDE HYDROGEN COMPRESSOR THEREFOR AND ALLOYS FOR USE
THEREIN", filed February 14, 2003, which is assigned to the same assignee as the current
application, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 09/902,320,
now U.S. Pat. No. 6,591,616, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent Application Serial
No. 09/444,810, now U.S. Pat. No. 6,305,442, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent
15 Application S.N. 09/435,497, now U.S. Pat. No. 6,193,929, all of the disclosures of which are
hereby incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF INVENTION

This invention generally relates to an apparatus and method of separation of water from
20 aqueous solutions and suspensions having contaminants using solar energy. More specifically,
this invention relates to the separation of water from brackish water to form desalinated water in
an electrolytic process driven by solar energy. Most specifically, this invention relates to the use
of solar energy to create an electric potential across electrodes to desalinate water through an

electrolytic water splitting and recombination process to form clean water while leaving behind salt and other impurities.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 Water is a precious and life sustaining liquid. Over 97% of the world water supplies are tied up in the ocean. The remaining 3% of the water exists as fresh water supply in natural and man-made lakes and the polar ice caps. With the looming environmental catastrophe brought upon by the global warming there is already a shortage of fresh water supply in the world. Many of the developing countries are suffering from the failure of the monsoon and consequently the
10 supply of fresh water in reservoirs. The global warming is causing the ice caps to recede thereby melting the fresh water supplies at the polar ice caps into the water that runs into the oceans. While fossil fuels themselves are dwindling and wars have been waged to control the remaining residues it is possible to foresee a day when wars will be fought for control of fresh water supplies. The danger is not in any future date but can happen within our generation. .

15 The general approaches for addressing water shortages can be categorized in terms of three basic strategies: conservation, identifying new sources of freshwater and converting brackish water to freshwater. The goal of water conservation is to promote responsible usage of water. Water conservationists seek to obtain the maximum benefit from existing freshwater sources through the encouragement of responsible usage practices. Although water conservation
20 is clearly beneficial, it is unlikely that it alone will meet the growing water needs of the world. The identification of new sources of freshwater involves searching for new aquifers, typically to supply the growing needs of a particular region as it develops or expands. New technologies permit geologists to search deeper into the earth for water and to search in regions that were

previously inaccessible. Other strategies for obtaining freshwater from new sources include extracting water from icebergs or the polar icecap. More controversially, growing regions with few local water resources are seeking a redistribution of the available resources through water transportation. The southwestern states, for example, have inquired into the possibility of shipping water from the Great Lakes to meet their water needs. Although the search for new freshwater resources will continue and new sources will be identified, it is clear that freshwater is a finite resource that is politically contentious and that the most accessible sources have already been located and are being consumed. Future sources will become increasingly expensive to both locate and utilize.

A third strategy, water conversion, seeks to produce freshwater from brackish water in an attempt to exploit the vast potential of the world's oceans. Water conversion is most commonly practiced today in arid regions, such as the Middle East, where little or no freshwater resources are naturally available. Conversion of brackish water to freshwater involves a desalination process in which freshwater or purified water is separated or extracted from brackish water.

There are a variety of methods available already to convert brackish water into potable water. Evaporation and condensation, reverse osmosis, and electrodialysis are some of the very common techniques.

The most common desalination process in use today is based on reverse osmosis, a separation method that uses pressure to induce diffusion of water from brackish water through a semi-permeable membrane to provide pure water on one side of the membrane and concentrating salts and impurities on the other side of the membrane. Although reverse osmosis is an effective desalination technique, it is slow, expensive and requires high energy consumption. Related techniques, such as electrodialysis, show improved energy efficiency, but nonetheless remain

costly, especially for high volume throughputs. Reverse osmosis and electrodialysis work very well with salt content under 60,000 ppm. Anything more than that would require higher pressures (close to 1000 psi) and the current membranes, in addition to being expensive cannot sustain such high pressures.

5 Evaporation/distillation is the preferred method. It is somewhat expensive but work is being performed to continuously decrease the cost by efficient designs.

 The current invention overcomes deficiencies in the prior art and provides a novel method and apparatus for the desalination of brackish water, which incorporates a solar powered system that electrolytically dissociates brackish water into hydrogen gas and oxygen gas to
10 eliminate impurities. The gaseous hydrogen and gaseous oxygen is combined to form water that may be used for human consumption or agricultural/industrial pursuits.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

 The instant invention provides a method and apparatus for converting brackish water to
15 freshwater. The method uses solar energy to produce electrical energy that is harnessed to separate pure water from brackish water through a water splitting reaction. Water splitting is a reaction in which liquid water is decomposed into hydrogen gas and oxygen gas. The change in phase from liquid to gas liberates hydrogen gas and oxygen gas from brackish water, thereby effecting a separation of hydrogen gas and oxygen gas from brackish water. Subsequent
20 recombination of hydrogen gas and oxygen gas provides purified water. The hydrogen gas may also be separately captured and stored, if desired, for later use as a fuel. The liberation of hydrogen gas and oxygen gas leads to a concentration of salts and other impurities in the brackish water.

In the instant invention, solar energy is collected by a photovoltaic device and converted to electrical energy that is provided to brackish water through submerged electrodes. The electrical energy is sufficient to drive the water splitting reaction to liberate hydrogen gas and oxygen gas in an electrolytic process. The hydrogen gas and oxygen gas evolve from the brackish water and are collected in a remote chamber for reversion to water. The reconverted water is substantially pure water that is free of brackish content. The reversion process generates electrical energy that can be separately harnessed or directed to the splitting process to aid the photovoltaic process.

A preferred embodiment of the present invention comprises an apparatus for electrolytic purification of brackish water. The apparatus includes a photovoltaic device for converting solar energy to electricity, an anode in electrical communication with the photovoltaic device and a cathode in electrical communication with said photovoltaic device. Also, both the anode and cathode are in contact with the brackish water. The solar energy causes the generation of an electric potential between the anode and cathode and the electrical potential induces a water splitting reaction of the brackish water. The water splitting reaction produces hydrogen gas and oxygen gas, which evolve from the brackish water. The oxygen gas and hydrogen gas are transferred to a reaction chamber and the hydrogen gas and oxygen gas react spontaneously in the reaction chamber to form water. The apparatus may further include means for collecting the hydrogen gas and means for collecting the oxygen gas. Additionally, the apparatus may further include a hydrogen purification system for purifying the hydrogen gas before entering the reaction chamber.

An embodiment of the present invention comprises an apparatus for the production of hydrogen gas from brackish water. The apparatus includes a photovoltaic device for converting

solar energy to electricity, an anode in electrical communication with the photovoltaic device and a cathode in electrical communication with said photovoltaic device. Also, both the anode and cathode are in contact with the brackish water. The solar energy causes the generation of an electric potential between the anode and cathode, the electrical potential inducing a water
5 reduction reaction of the brackish water that produces hydrogen gas, which evolves from the brackish water. The apparatus may further include a hydrogen storage material, the hydrogen storage material absorbing and storing the hydrogen gas. Additionally, the apparatus may further include a hydrogen purification system for purifying the hydrogen gas before absorption into the hydrogen storage material.

10 A preferred embodiment of the present invention comprises a method for the electrolytic purification of brackish water. The method begins by contacting the brackish water with an anode and contacting the brackish water with a cathode, then applying an electrical potential across the anode and the cathode. The electrical potential is supplied by a photovoltaic device in electrical communication with the anode and the cathode. The electrical potential induces a
15 water splitting reaction of the brackish water, producing hydrogen gas and oxygen gas, the hydrogen gas and said oxygen gas evolving from the brackish water. The hydrogen gas is transferred to a reaction chamber and the oxygen gas is transferred to the reaction chamber and the hydrogen gas and the oxygen gas react spontaneously in the reaction chamber to form water, H₂O. The method may further include collecting the hydrogen gas prior to transferring the
20 hydrogen gas to the reaction chamber and collecting the oxygen gas prior to transferring the oxygen gas to the reaction chamber.

The photovoltaic device is preferably a silicon based device optimized for the efficient collection and conversion of sunlight to electricity. Optimally, the photovoltaic device is

lightweight and in the form of a thin film that can be spread out adjacent to or over the surface of a source of brackish water.

An embodiment of the present invention provides an apparatus and method for the electrolysis of brackish water to liberate hydrogen gas and oxygen gas, which combine to produce fresh water, wherein power for the apparatus is supplied by a photovoltaic device.

An embodiment of the present invention provides an apparatus and method for the electrolytic reduction of brackish water to produce hydrogen gas, wherein power for the apparatus is supplied by a photovoltaic device.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In order to assist in the understanding of the various aspects of the present invention and various embodiments thereof, reference is now made to the appended drawings, in which like reference numerals refer to like elements. The drawings are exemplary only, and should not be construed as limiting the invention.

Figure 1 is a fragmentary, cross-sectional view of a tandem or cascade photovoltaic device comprising a plurality of p-i-n-type cells, each layer of the cells formed from an amorphous silicon alloy material;

Figure 2 is a schematic depiction of an embodiment of the electrolytic desalination apparatus of the present invention;

Figure 3 is a schematic depiction of an embodiment of an electrolytic desalination apparatus of the present invention in an ocean environment;

Figure 4 is a process flow diagram of an embodiment of the present invention, wherein the electrical potential induces a water splitting reaction to produce hydrogen gas and oxygen gas;

Figure 5 is a process flow diagram of an embodiment of the present invention, wherein the electrical potential induces a water reduction reaction to produce hydrogen gas that is absorbed by and stored in a hydrogen storage material; and

Figure 6 is an embodiment of a hydrogen purification system that may be used in conjunction with an embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The instant invention is directed at the production of freshwater from brackish water. Brackish water refers generally to briny forms of water that are unsuitable for human consumption, agricultural and/or industrial uses. The oceans of the world are far and away the largest natural sources of brackish water. An objective of the instant invention is the separation or removal of water substantially without brackish content (e.g. dissolved or suspended salts or impurities) to provide a purer form of water. This purer form of water is suitable for human consumption, agriculture, and/or industrial use and may hereinafter be referred to as non-brackish water. Non-brackish water includes pure water as well as forms of water that include dissolved or suspended salts or compounds that are non-deleterious with respect to human consumption, agriculture or an industrial use. FIG. 4 is a flow diagram of an embodiment of the present invention. A source of brackish water, such as an ocean, is located **40** and electrodes, an anode and a cathode, are set in contact with the brackish water **41**. A source of solar energy **42**, i.e. sunlight, provides solar energy to a photovoltaic (PV) device **43** in electrical communication

with the electrodes. The PV device provides an electric potential across the electrodes **44** and the electric potential induces electrolysis of water **45**, i.e. H_2O , within the brackish water. The electrolysis produces hydrogen gas and oxygen gas **46**. The gases flow to a reaction chamber **47**, wherein the oxygen gas and hydrogen gas spontaneously combine to form water, H_2O **48**.

5 A schematic depiction of an apparatus for the production of non-brackish water from brackish water, generally referred to as **100**, is presented in FIG. 2. The instant invention utilizes a renewable source of energy, sunlight, to effect the formation of non-brackish water from brackish water **101**. Sunlight is collected by a photovoltaic device **102** and converted to electrical energy that is used to induce a water splitting (water electrolysis) reaction in brackish water **101**.

10 The brackish water **101** may be a source of brackish water, such as an ocean illustrated in FIG. 2, that is used in its natural setting to form non-brackish water according to the instant invention or the brackish water may be collected from a natural source and transported to a facility designed for the production of non-brackish water. The brackish water may also include chemically or physically pre-treated forms of natural brackish water. The photovoltaic device **102** may be

15 placed into, on the surface of or adjacent to brackish water. The photovoltaic device **102** includes one or more materials that are capable of absorbing solar energy and converting it to electrical energy. The electrical energy produced by the photovoltaic device **102** is provided as an electrical potential to electrodes **104** and **105** that are in contact with the brackish water **101**. The potential between the electrodes **104** and **105** of the photovoltaic device **102** is sufficient to drive

20 an electrolytic water splitting reaction that liberates hydrogen gas and oxygen gas from the brackish water. The hydrogen gas and oxygen gas evolve from the brackish water **101**, are collected, and directed toward a separate reaction chamber **106** where they are recombined to form non-brackish water.

The gases may be collected using compartments **107** and **108** to collect the evolving gases as the gases bubble to the surface, as illustrated in FIG. 3. Preferably, an individual collection chamber is set over each of the electrodes **104** and **105**. Once collected in the collection chambers, pipes or other conduits **109** and **110** may be utilized to transport the gases to the reaction chamber **106**. A pump **111**, such as diffusion pump, may be set in the gas conduits or reaction chamber **106** to assist in forcing the flow of oxygen gas and hydrogen gas into the reaction chamber **106**. Preferably, the reaction chamber **106** is a vacuum-sealed chamber. If only hydrogen gas is desired to be collected, the oxygen gas may be vented into the atmosphere or collected for another purpose. For, example, a valve **112** in the oxygen conduit **109** may be set to close and an oxygen chamber vent **113** in the oxygen chamber **107** set to open in order to vent the oxygen gas. Another conduit **114** may be set at the bottom of the reaction chamber **106** to allow water to flow from the reaction chamber **106** to a water collection vessel.

The embodiment of the present invention illustrated in FIG. 3 is a preferred embodiment of the present invention, wherein the source of brackish water **201** is located in a cove fed by an ocean. A photovoltaic device **202** provides an electric potential to an anode and a cathode. A platform for the photovoltaic device and accompanying electrodes and conduits may be attached to the ocean floor or adapted to float on the water. As the electric potential across the electrodes **204** and **205** induces the electrolytic water splitting reaction, hydrogen gas and oxygen gas are liberated from the ocean and the concentration of other elements, such as salt, in the ocean water increases. However, as the tide ebbs and flows into the cove, new ocean water is swept into contact with the electrodes and the electrolytic water splitting reaction continues. Due to the vast expanse of earth's oceans, the oceans will retain the other elements but create a negligible overall effect in concentration of those elements. The hydrogen gas and oxygen gas may be collected

and transported to a land facility **206**, where the gases are combined to produce non-brackish water. The hydrogen gas and oxygen gas are combined in a reactor chamber located in the facility **206**. If only hydrogen gas is to be collected, the oxygen may be vented into the atmosphere.

5 The photovoltaic device preferably utilizes a semiconductor as the active material. A preferred photovoltaic device structure for the instant invention is the n-i-p structure. This structure consists of an i-type (intrinsic) semiconductor layer interposed between an n-type semiconductor layer and a p-type semiconductor layer. In a typical simple device, a transparent conducting electrode layer is contacted to the p-type layer and a metal electrode is contacted to
10 the n-type layer. In such a device, incident sunlight passes through the transparent electrode and p-type layer and is absorbed by the i-type layer. Absorption by the i-type layer leads to promotion of electrons from the valence band to the conduction band and to the formation of electron-hole pairs in the i-type layer. The electrons and holes are the charge carriers needed to produce electricity. The adjacent p-type and n-type layers establish a potential in the i-type layer
15 that separates the electrons and holes. The electrons and holes are subsequently conducted to oppositely charged collection electrodes that provide the potential needed to induce the water splitting reaction.

Representative semiconductor materials suitable for the absorption of solar energy include crystalline silicon, polycrystalline silicon, amorphous silicon, microcrystalline silicon or
20 related materials, including alloys of silicon with germanium. Other materials such as GaAs, CdS and CuInSe₂ may also be used. These materials can be prepared as n-type, i-type or p-type and have bandgap energies that permit absorption of at least a portion of the solar spectrum. Amorphous silicon is a preferred i-type material in a n-i-p structure because it possesses a direct

bandgap and exhibits a high absorption strength over a wide wavelength range of the solar spectrum. The high absorbance of amorphous silicon is desirable because it leads to efficient absorption of sunlight in thinner devices. Thinner devices require less material and are correspondingly more cost effective.

5 A variety of n-i-p photovoltaic structures are operable to provide the electrical potential required to effect the water splitting reaction of the instant invention. A basic objective is to use a photovoltaic device structure that maximizes the absorption of solar energy and the conversion efficiency of solar energy to electrical energy. Several strategies for improving the performance of amorphous silicon based photovoltaic devices are possible. These strategies include the use of
10 microcrystalline silicon to form the p-type layer, integration of two or more n-i-p structures to form tandem devices, and inclusion of a back reflector layer in the structure. U.S. Pat. No. 4,609,771, the disclosure of which is hereby incorporated herein by reference, discloses the use of microcrystalline silicon p-type layers in solar cells. The inventors therein demonstrate that microcrystalline silicon has a higher transparency to sunlight than amorphous silicon. As a result,
15 use of a microcrystalline silicon p-type layer allows more incident sunlight to reach the i-type layer and a higher concentration of charge carriers is produced as a result. U.S. Pat. Nos. 4,600,801 and 5,977,476, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated herein by reference.

 The strategy associated with tandem devices is to couple multiple n-i-p structures in series in an attempt to harvest as much incident sunlight as possible. Although high, the
20 absorption efficiency of i-type amorphous silicon layers is substantially less than 100%. Placement of a second n-i-p structure directly below the n-i-p structure that is directly incident to the sunlight provides an opportunity to capture light not absorbed by the first n-i-p structure. Tandem structures that include the stacking of three n-i-p structures to form triple cells have also

been described. Additional strategies such as bandgap tailoring of the i-layer from one n-i-p structure to the next have also been demonstrated to improve the light harvesting efficiency of tandem structures. In these strategies, separate n-i-p structures in a tandem structure include i-type layers that are optimized to selectively absorb different portions of the solar spectrum.

5 Amorphous silicon, for example, may be used to absorb the short wavelength portions of the solar spectrum, while SiGe alloys having various amounts of Ge may be used to absorb longer wavelengths since alloying with Ge reduces the bandgap. Representative triple cell structures are described in the following journal publications, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated herein by reference: “Roll to roll manufacturing of amorphous silicon alloy solar cells with in
10 situ cell performance diagnostics” by M. Izu and T. Ellison (Solar Energy Materials & Solar Cells vol. 78, p. 613 – 626 (2003)) and “Triple-junction amorphous silicon alloy solar cell with 14.6% initial and 13.0% stable conversion efficiencies” by J. Yang, A. Banerjee and S. Guha (Applied Physics Letters, vol. 70, p. 2975 – 2977 (1997)).

Back reflecting layers are reflective layers that are typically deposited directly on the
15 substrate. The role of a back reflecting layer is to reflect any light passing through all of the n-i-p cells stacked in a tandem device. Through this reflection process, light that is initially not absorbed is redirected to the stacked n-i-p devices for a second pass and improved absorption efficiency results. Representative back reflecting layer materials include Al, ZnO, Ag, Ag/ZnO, and Al/ZnO.

20 An important advantage associated with amorphous silicon is the ability to manufacture it in a large scale continuous manufacturing process. Crystalline silicon, on the other hand, can only be prepared in a slow, smaller scale process because of the slow crystallization processes associated with its formation. Consequently, great efforts have been directed at the large scale

production of amorphous silicon. Modern web rolling processes permit the high speed production of single and multilayer thin films amorphous silicon based devices. The production of amorphous silicon on a continuous web has been previously described in, for example, U.S. Pat. Nos. 4,485,125; 4,492,181; and 4,423,701, and U.S. Appl. Ser. No. 10/228,542 the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated herein by reference.

A p-i-n multiple cell device may be obtained by reversing the order of the n-plus and p-plus layers or regions of the n-i-p multiple cell device described above. Referring to FIG. 1, a tandem or cascade-type photovoltaic cell, formed of successive p-i-n layers each including an amorphous silicon alloy material, is shown generally by numeral **10**. The photovoltaic device illustrated in FIG. 1 may be used with the present invention. FIG. 1 shows a p-i-n type photovoltaic device such as a solar cell made up of individual p-i-n type cells **12a**, **12b** and **12c**. Below the lowermost cell **12a** is a substrate **11** which may be transparent or formed from a metallic surfaced foil. The substrate material **11** may be stainless steel, aluminum, tantalum, molybdenum or chrome, as well as substrates formed of synthetic polymers, glass or glass-like material on which an electrically conductive electrode is applied.

Each of the cells **12a**, **12b** and **12c** include an amorphous semiconductor body containing at least a silicon alloy. Each of the semiconductor bodies include an n-type conductivity region or layer **20a**, **20b** and **20c**; an intrinsic region or layer **18a**, **18b** and **18c**; and a p-type conductivity region or layer **16a**, **16b** and **16c**. The term "amorphous" as used herein includes all materials exhibiting long-range disorder, regardless of their short or intermediate range order and regardless of whether those materials are otherwise labeled polycrystalline or crystalline. As illustrated, cell **12b** is an intermediate cell and, as indicated in FIG. 1, additional intermediate cells may be stacked atop the illustrated cells.

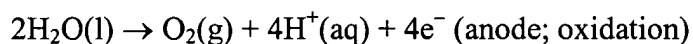
For each of the cells **12a**, **12b** and **12c**, the p-type and n-type layers of semiconductor material are characteristically light transmissive and highly conductive. The intrinsic layers of semiconductor material are characterized by an adjusted wavelength threshold for solar photoresponse, high light absorption, low dark conductivity and high photoconductivity,

5 including sufficient amounts of a band gap adjusting element or elements to optimize the band gap for the particular cell application. Preferably, the intrinsic layers of semiconductor material are band gap adjusted to provide cell **12a** with the lowest band gap, cell **12c** with the highest band gap and cell **12b** with a band gap between the other two, as light enters the semiconductor material from the top. However, the intrinsic layers of semiconductor material are band gap
10 adjusted to provide cell **12a** with the highest band gap, cell **12c** with the lowest band gap and cell **12b** with a band gap between the other two, if light enters the semiconductor material from the bottom. The n-type layers of semiconductor material are characterized by low light absorption and high conductivity. The thickness of the band gap adjusted layers of intrinsic material may be in the range of 800 to 5,000 angstroms. The thickness of the n-type and p-type layers may be in
15 the range of 25 to 400 angstroms.

Placement of the electrodes of a photovoltaic device according to the instant invention in contact with brackish water provides an electric potential or voltage that is used to split water contained in the brackish water. The overall water splitting reaction is an electrolytic reaction given by



where the electrode half reactions are



and



Since the water splitting reaction is not thermodynamically spontaneous, an electrochemical potential is needed to effect the reaction. At standard conditions, a minimum potential of 1.23 V is needed to drive the water splitting reaction. Potential above the minimum are preferable since they improve the rate of the reaction and compensate for any overvoltages that may be required to form oxygen gas or hydrogen gas. The tandem cell photovoltaic devices described hereinabove provide voltages at or above 1.23 V and typically provide voltages of at least 1.5 V.

Once the water splitting reaction is initiated, hydrogen gas and oxygen gas form and evolve from the brackish water. The hydrogen gas and oxygen gas can then be collected and later recombined in a reaction chamber to form non-brackish water. The collector may be a separate component that directly feeds the evolving hydrogen gas and evolving oxygen gas to a reaction chamber or may be an integral part of the reaction chamber. The collection of hydrogen gas and oxygen gas may occur separately since each gas is formed at different, spatially separated electrodes or both gases may be collected together. Once collected, hydrogen gas and oxygen gas can be reacted in a separate reaction chamber to form non-brackish water. Since the reaction of hydrogen gas and oxygen gas to form liquid water occurs spontaneously, the reaction releases energy in the form of heat and/or electrical energy. The heat or electrical energy so produced may be delivered as energy to other processes and may also be used to supplement the energy provided by the photovoltaic device in the water splitting reaction. Electrical energy produced by the reaction of oxygen gas and hydrogen gas can be extracted by equipping the reaction chamber with electrodes, where the reaction of hydrogen gas and oxygen gas causes an electric potential to develop between the electrodes. This electric potential represents a source of electrical energy that can be exploited.

Liberation of hydrogen gas and oxygen gas from brackish water according to the instant invention effects a separation of hydrogen and oxygen in a substantially pure form while leaving behind a more concentrated brackish solution. Recombination of the hydrogen gas and oxygen gas in a reaction chamber consequently results in a substantially pure form of water that is substantially desalinated and suitable for human consumption, agriculture and/or industrial use.

The efficiency of the water splitting reaction may depend on the particular composition of brackish water electrolyzed in the instant process. Since brackish water is a naturally occurring substance, its composition varies from source to source. Differences in the identity and concentration of various dissolved salts occur for brackish water obtained from different sources. The presence of dissolved ions may introduce competing oxidation and/or reduction reactions that may impair the efficiency of the preferred water oxidation and reduction reactions listed hereinabove.

The presence of dissolved metal cations in brackish water may introduce reduction reactions that compete with the reduction of water to form hydrogen gas. Metal cation reduction reactions become more competitive as the activity of the metal decreases. Cations of the less active metals (e.g. Au^{3+} , Ag^+ , Cu^{2+} , Fe^{3+} , Cd^{2+} , and Pt^{2+}) have reduction reactions that are more competitive with the water reduction reaction than do cations of the more active metals (e.g. alkali metals, alkaline earth metals, Al^{3+}). The instant solar induced electrolytic water desalination process is therefore preferably employed on brackish water that includes a low concentration of the less active metals. Half cell reduction potentials of the cations present in a particular sample of brackish water in conjunction with well established electrochemical theory, including overvoltage effects, can be employed to predict the likelihood of efficient hydrogen gas production from the particular sample of brackish water in the instant electrolytic process.

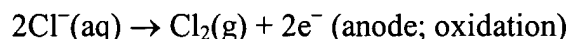
The presence of dissolved anions in brackish water may introduce oxidation reactions that compete with the oxidation of water to form oxygen gas. The halides Br^- , I^- , and Cl^- , if present in sufficient amounts, undergo competitive oxidation reactions to form the gaseous dihalides Br_2 , I_2 , and Cl_2 . Oxoanions such as SO_4^{2-} , CO_3^{2-} , NO_3^- , and PO_4^{3-} that include a non-metal in a high oxidation state, in contrast, exhibit little or no tendency to undergo a competitive oxidation reaction and their presence in brackish water does not materially hinder the water oxidation reaction. The relative ease of oxidation of anions in brackish water in comparison to water oxidation governs the efficiency of the production of oxygen gas from brackish water. Half cell oxidation potentials of the anions present in a particular sample of brackish water in conjunction with well established electrochemical theory, including overvoltage effects, can be employed to predict the likelihood of efficient oxygen gas production from the particular sample of brackish water in the instant electrolytic process.

As indicated hereinabove, hydrogen gas and oxygen gas form at different, spatially separated electrodes and may be separately collected. As a result, the instant electrolytic process may also be used to produce hydrogen gas and/or oxygen gas without recombination to form non-brackish water. The instant electrolytic process may also be used to produce one of hydrogen gas or oxygen gas when the brackish water content contains cations or anions that interfere with or out-compete water oxidation or reduction. If brackish water includes cations that are reduced more efficiently than water, the water reduction reaction to form hydrogen gas may not occur efficiently, but the brackish water may still be suitable for efficient production of oxygen gas. Similarly, if the brackish water includes anions that are more efficiently oxidized than water, the water oxidation reaction to form oxygen gas may not occur efficiently, but the brackish water may nonetheless be suitable for the efficient production of hydrogen gas.

As an example of the foregoing, hydrogen may be produced through the photochloralkali reaction when the chloride ion concentration of brackish water is sufficiently high. The photochloralkali reaction is given by



5 where the half cell reactions are



and



At sufficiently high chloride concentration, the formation of chlorine gas becomes increasingly efficient and may out-compete the oxidation of water to form oxygen gas. The formation of hydrogen gas, however, through water reduction may remain efficient. The photochloralkali reaction is thus an example of the formation of hydrogen gas from brackish water having a composition that inhibits or precludes the formation of oxygen gas. FIG. 5 is a flow diagram of an embodiment of the present invention. A source of brackish water, such as an ocean, is located 10 50 and electrodes, an anode and a cathode, are set in contact with the brackish water 51. A source of solar energy 52, i.e. sunlight, provides solar energy to a photovoltaic (PV) device 53 in electrical communication with the electrodes. The PV device provides an electric potential across the electrodes 54 and the electric potential induces electrolytic reduction of water 55, i.e. H_2O , within the brackish water. The electrolysis produces hydrogen gas 56. The hydrogen gas 20 flows in to hydrogen storage material 57 and the hydrogen storage material absorbs and stores the hydrogen gas 58.

Hydrogen gas produced according to the instant photovoltaic electrolytic process may be used as a fuel for fuel cells, hydrogen engines, etc. Use of hydrogen as a fuel requires storage of

hydrogen in a convenient form with an ability to retrieve the hydrogen for later combustion or consumption. In an embodiment of the instant invention, hydrogen produced in the instant photovoltaic electrolytic process is collected and stored in a hydrogen storage material. A hydrogen storage material is a metal alloy having a capacity to store hydrogen on its surface or within its interior. A wide variety of hydrogen storage materials is known in the art. Leading hydrogen storage materials include the A_2B , AB_2 and AB_5 families of materials. The instant inventor has invented, individually and jointly, a number of highly effective hydrogen storage materials. These materials include one or more transition metals (e.g. Zr, Fe, Ni, Mg, Ti, V, Cr, Mn, Co) or alloys thereof as well as alloys of transition metals with rare earth metals (e.g. La, mischmetal, Nd, Pr, Ce). Representative hydrogen storage materials are described, for example, in U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,193,929; 6,328,821; 6,517,970; 6,536,487; 5,536,591 and 6,270,719; the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated herein by reference.

The instant invention may be used in conjunction with a hydrogen purification system to purify the hydrogen gas of the water splitting reaction or the water reduction reaction. An exemplary hydrogen purification system is disclosed in co-pending U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 10/427,272, entitled "METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR ELECTROREFINING IMPURE HYDROGEN" filed May 1, 2003, which is hereby incorporated herein by reference. The '272 application discloses an invention which provides a method and system for purifying an impure hydrogen stream containing any number of gaseous contaminants. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the hydrogen gas produce by electrolysis of the brackish water flows to an inlet of the hydrogen purification system of the '272 application. Referring to FIG. 3, the system 10 includes an input 11 for receiving an impure hydrogen stream 12 from a source of impure hydrogen 13, a gas receiving chamber 14, an output 15 for venting a

contaminant rich gas stream 16 out of the gas receiving chamber 14, and an output 17 for providing a purified hydrogen stream 18. The purified hydrogen stream is then sent to the reactor chamber to combine with oxygen gas to produce purified water. The hydrogen purification system of the '272 application also includes at least one gas diffusion anode 20, at least one electrolytic cathode 30, and a power source 50 for supplying power to the electrodes. The power source 50 may be any means for supplying an electrical current such as a battery, a power outlet, or a generator. The power source 50 may also be a generator powered by the combustion of the contaminant gases contained in the impure hydrogen stream such as methane (CH₄) or other hydrocarbons. The power source may also be supplemented by an electrical current supplied from the gas diffusion anode. Both the anode and cathode of the hydrogen purification system of the '272 application are positioned in an alkaline solution bath 40, which may be comprised of a 15 to 30 weight percent KOH solution. The hydrogen purification system of the '272 application operating temperature is in the range of 70°C to 90°C.

The gas receiving chamber comprises an input for receiving the gaseous stream of impure hydrogen and an output for venting an outlet stream containing contaminants from the stream of impure hydrogen and hydrogen not absorbed by said gas diffusion anode. The outlet stream may also be fed into a hydrogen separator adapted to separate the outlet stream into a hydrogen stream containing mostly hydrogen and a waste stream containing mostly contaminants. The resulting hydrogen stream may then be fed into the impure hydrogen stream and the waste stream may be vented to the atmosphere or collected. For a more detailed explanation of a hydrogen purification system, please refer to the '272 application.

During the electrolysis of the water, some water may be converted to water vapor and caught in the stream of hydrogen gas flowing from the cathode. In a preferred embodiment, a condenser may be incorporated to remove the water vapor from the hydrogen stream.

The foregoing is provided for purposes of explaining and disclosing preferred
5 embodiments of the present invention. It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that variations and modifications of the present invention can be made without departing from the scope or spirit of the invention. For example, changes in the type of photovoltaic device, the type of hydrogen storage alloy and position of the electrodes, will be apparent to those skilled in the art. These changes and others may be made without departing from the scope or spirit of the
10 invention in the following claims.